

The Journey of life, if you will excuse the overly used metaphor, offers to its travelers, two separate roads or paths. | I speak not of good and evil, but of commitment and noncommitment. | In our lives we have the choice of being active participants, or lifeless observers, in the words of a professor I once had, sitting on the curb watching the parade go by. | Most of us, however, commit ourselves to something; most of us discover something in life that matters very much, and to that something we give ourselves. | For some it is a service club, for others a profession, for others a hobby or avocation. | In any case, when we find that something and give ourselves to it: it costs us. | Commitment to anything is expensive. Partisans of a political party, committed to that party and its candidate, make considerable expenditures of money, time, abilities, dedication. Political partisanship demands that the individual submit himself--and freely give of himself to the cause. | This is good. | Of the two roadways of life, the road of activism, partisanship; commitment is the one on which history is made and satisfaction is found. | The cost of commitment to a cause, whatever it may be, is happily paid; we don't mind paying for what concerns us ultimately. | We all pay this cost--to our commitments, our labors of love--every day.

And then the Church of Jesus Christ asks our commitment; our loyalty, our time, money and abilities--and suddenly the predictable human behaviourism is reversed. | For some reason this is a commitment that is not supposed to cost anything. Our time goes freely to the PTA, the service club, the political party. But the work of the Church? "I'm sorry, I'm just too busy!" Our money goes freely to a list of installment purchases, entertainment, vacations, the causes we love. But the church, the work of Jesus Christ? "I'm sorry--but there's just not enough to go around." And so the average Presbyterian expression of Stewardship remains at \$1.83 per week--or roughly

~~the cost of six packs of cigarettes.~~

Religion in American life seems to be more of a supermarket than an altar--upon which we worship. | Church members belong to a Church to receive--to be served--to obtain whatever product the Church happens to be marketing. | And should the church stop acting like a spiritual super market | should it suddenly see its mission in terms of giving and sacrificing--instead of dispensing moralisms, or comfort or security--it finds its pews empty. | I don't suppose there is any 24 hr. period in my life that passes without someone telling me: ("I quit going to church because I wasn't getting anything out of it.") And in this single statement, repeated with monotonous regularity, lies the whole paradox of religious faith in contemporary life. | We commit ourselves to everything else--and our commitments cost us; but our commitment to the church--our faith--hinges on that very frail string of our personal whims. | This commitment is supposed to serve us. | Churches are full today--but there is not a minister in the pulpit anywhere, who is not painfully aware that the commitment and faith of a great number of his people, or quickly vanish, should he say the wrong word or take the wrong stand. | And so I conclude this introduction to a sermon entitled, ("The Cost of Christian Discipleship") by suggesting that Christianity is not Christianity unless it is Discipleship; and discipleship is not discipleship without commitment; and commitment is a hollow, hypocritical gesture unless it costs us something. | To illustrate this disturbing suggestion--I direct your attention to our equally disturbing N.T. lesson this morning. | A more accurate statement would be: I direct your attention to the Word of God. from whence this suggestion came. | I make no claims of originality.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem. | And as they were going along, a man, (Matthew defines him as a scribe)--or ecclesiastical lawyer, said to Jesus; ("I will follow you wherever you go.") The man took

the initiative--he offered his life. | And our Lord replied; ("Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.") It was an impulsive commitment; and Jesus knew that the man had made it without really counting the cost. | Wild animals have abodes, nests, holes, caves; men need the comfort of a home. | And a scribe, accustomed to hours at the writing bench laboring over the law scrolls, needed a home more than most. | But in absolute integrity our Lord could not promise even this very basic need. | His mission was such; discipleship was such, that a man had to forgo the security of home life. | And so this immensely capable, and mature leader of men, was rejected as a disciple.

Turning to another man, Jesus commanded: ("Follow me.") The scribe had impulsively volunteered; this man is anonymous, just one of the crowd; and to him came the call of Christ, "~~Follow me~~". | His reply: ("Let me go first and bury my father.") If there ever was a legitimate excuse, this is it. A man simply doesn't walk away from the funeral of his father. | This was especially true for the devout Jew. | According to the law, ^{the duty of} burying one's father was to take absolute precedence over anything else ~~the person~~ had to do. | The law is careful to explain that under these circumstances a man may be excused from reciting the Shema--a rarity reserved for the most extenuating situations. | Surely this man's predicament would have elicited the sympathies of the other disciples themselves. | Our Lord's reply? ("Leave the dead to bury the dead; as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.") Is this a revelation of a hidden harshness? | Was Jesus absolutely callous to human need and dignity as well as the sacred law? | I don't think so, for this is the same Jesus who from the cross arranged for the care of his own grief stricken mother. | No, this is merely a very blunt and disturbing definition of the cost of discipleship. | It must come first; it must be absolute; it must command a man's immediate and complete dedication. The man was willing; but not on Jesus' terms--and so he too was rejected.

In total then this little story tells us much about the relationship of a Christian to his Lord; and in the telling we cannot help but hear a thundering, prophetic indictment of our own churchmanship. | The story tells us that believing in Jesus Christ--and then following him because we believe is--never easy; must always come first; is an act of immediate obedience. | In short, discipleship is costly--and if we are not ready to pay the cost we are not fit to be called Christians.

The truly disturbing aspect of this story is the common, "humanness" of the three potential disciples. | Their excuses were not contrived; they were men of belief and faith; | they wanted to be disciples. | They reflect, quite accurately, the stance and position of every man as he encounters Jesus Christ. | We too, have commitments that make it impossible to always give our all. | We too must bury our dead, and say farewell, and retain order in our homes. | If these men were not fit--who is? | Surely not us. | It wasn't the only time Jesus made what seemed to be outlandishly harsh demands of his followers. | Many times the disciples found themselves asking ("who, then, can be saved?") Ethical theologians have struggled for centuries with this passage and others like it. | And their consensus has been that natural man cannot possibly fulfill the demands of Jesus. | Only in the monastery, only in the life of celibacy, completely withdrawn from the world can a man afford to be a disciple on Christ's terms. | But the message of the N.T. is one of love and hope--not despair and condemnation. | We know that God accepts us as we are; we know that Christ loved his fumbling, half hearted followers--and died for them. | We affirm that God has made us free and human--and in our freedom and humanness we cannot be perfect. | But this admission of our frailty is not a barrier behind which to hid; it does not negate Christ's imperatives to "would be disciples." | Our inability to follow on his terms does not erase the words from the N.T. or the fact that he said them,

~~He says~~

God forgives: God accepts--in fact God has posited his Kingdom on the faltering, stumbling faith of disciples like you and me. | His demands still cut through to us; the cost is still as great; we may fall down--but he is ever calling us to stand back up and be counted. | We may not always be able to pay it, but the cost of discipleship remains the same.

("You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip") the old saying goes. | And it would appear that you cannot squeeze commitment out of people with weak faith. | This seems to be the root of the problem. | Too many of us are in favor of the Church, we know we ought to be doing more; we know we ought to give more--time, abilities and money. | But underneath we are waiting for faith to ("happen" to us.) the interest is there--but not the motivation and we go on nurturing the illusions that someday something will happen, some day I'll know the answers to my questions; someday faith will happen to me and then I'll be a committed Christian. | It reminds me of the story of the little girl who was sitting alone at the home of one of her friends. The mother, aware of her own daughter's particular eating habits, asked the young guest if she like asparagus. | Yes, came the answer, loud and clear. | After dinner, however, she noticed that the asparagus remained on the little girl's plate, untouched. | I thought you liked asparagus she asked. Oh I do, I do I like asparagus a lot--but not well enough to eat.

We too, like the Church, we like the feeling of Church membership; we like to think of ourselves as Christians. | The interest and affection are there--but not the obedient commitment. | Arthur McKay, in his book, Servants and Stewards: quotes the well-known hymn ("Take thou ourselves O Lord, Heart mind and will. Through our surrendered sould, Thy Plan fulfill. We yield ourselves to thee, time, talents all; We hear and henceforth heed, Thy sovereign call.") A hymn which clearly expresses the cost of discipleship. But then he describes a typical church member's prayer, having left the sanctuary--the melody still in his mind:

"Look God, I didn't mean that literally | I can give some praise to you if there's nothing more directly related to my interests that I must do. | I can spend an occasional hour in worship from time to time, but it isn't always convenient. | But God what I'm really looking for is some kind of bargain basement religion. | What I'd really like to do, but a certain churchly modesty forbids me to say it, is this: I'd like to accept the unconditional offer of love that I see in Jesus Christ, I'm willing to receive as much as you can give' but God, I just don't have time to match your faithfulness with my own. | I'm looking for religion at a discount."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was executed by the Nazi's, wrote prophetically about commitment, faith and its demands: in his book-- the title of which is the same as this sermon. | Bonhoeffer saw that faith does not just "happen" to a man who is patiently waiting for it. | Rather the Holy Spirit ignites the spark of faith in the heart of the man who lays his life on the line in total commitment. | Faith becomes a possibility only after it has cost us something. | In his letters from Prison Bonhoeffer wrote a sentence that I find myself repeating when my faith falters: ("Only the believer obeys--and only the obedient truly believes.") The whole testi- money of ~~the~~ modern saint, in the best N.T. tradition, is that we do not dare call ourselves disciples until our discipleship has cost us. | If we profess faith, but have not sacrificed or suffered or paid, our possession is cheap faith, cheap grace--which, like any cheap product doesn't last very long ^{is} not very ~~stable~~. Durable.

The Church of Jesus Christ in America today--needs to hear this N.T. story; | ^{Presbytery} we in this congregation need to hear it. | For, if the claims it makes are true we have a lot of soul searching to do. | It's very easy for me to stand here and preach about the cost of discipleship; and it's not very difficult for you as long as my words are general in nature. | But in conclusion let us experience together the uncomfortable task of being specific let us see what the cost of discip;eship is for us, here and now, in this

church and in this community.

We cannot suffer in a concentration camp. We can't be martyrs; I don't think God would have us all throw our several responsibilities and commitments to the wind and become pious and obedient hermits. But God has called us to be his Church in Dyer. And being that church involves providing a program of Chr. Ed. and a program of Evang. It means providing the ~~now~~ opportunity for fellowship together, it means concrete service to our town our nation and the world at large. It means the responsibility of worship, regularly and faithfully. Finally, in the fall of 1964 it means providing the resources for a new and larger building so that we can ~~more~~ effectively do those things we are called to do. I would be a hypocrite if I told you the total church program has all the help it needs--and that we have as much money as we can use. I would be worse than a hypocrite if I told you our building program will be easy and convenient. The truth is, that to be a faithful member of this Church is not, and will not be easy. Rather it will be costly--in time--abilities and resources.

Is there a price tag on Christianity? Is there a cost of Christian Discipleship? Automatically we say: ("heavens no;") but our text--our situation today tells us that there most certainly is. In the weeks ahead let us be mindful of this story; let us have the courage and integrity to see the cost of discipleship. And then, united in heart and spirit by the Holy Spirit--let us say to God"

"Take Thou ourselves O Lord, heart, mind and will,
Through our surrendered souls, thy plan fulfill
We yield ourselves to thee, time, talents, all
We hear and henceforth heed--Thy Sovereign call."